



*To fulfill President Lincoln's promise "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan" by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's Veterans.*

## **Chief Freedom of Information Act Officer Report March 2022**

**Kurt DelBene**  
**Assistant Secretary for Information &  
Technology and Chief FOIA Officer**

## High-Volume Agencies Receiving More Than 50 Requests in FY20

### Content of 2022 Chief FOIA Officer Reports

#### **Section 1: Steps Taken to Apply the Presumption of Openness**

The guiding principle underlying DOJ's [FOIA Guidelines](#) is the presumption of openness.

Please answer the following questions in order to describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied to all decisions involving the FOIA. You may also include any additional information that illustrates how your agency is working to apply the presumption of openness.

#### **A. FOIA Leadership**

1. The FOIA requires each agency to designate a Chief FOIA Officer who is a senior official at the Assistant Secretary or equivalent level. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 552(j)(1) (2018). Is your agency's Chief FOIA Officer at this level?

**Yes**

2. Please provide the name and title of your agency's Chief FOIA Officer.

**Kurt DelBene**

**Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology and Chief Information Officer**

#### **B. FOIA Training**

3. The FOIA directs agency Chief FOIA Officers to ensure that FOIA training is offered to agency personnel. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(j)(2)(F). Please describe the efforts your agency has undertaken to ensure proper FOIA training is made available and used by agency personnel.

**In lieu of COVID19 the agency has provided mainly virtual FOIA trainings to FOIA personnel. The agency FOIA Officers attended VA and VHA FOIA webinars. FOIA Officers reviewed DOJ's website material and American Society of Access Professionals (ASAP).**

4. Did your FOIA professionals or the personnel at your agency who have FOIA responsibilities attend substantive FOIA training during the reporting period such as that provided by the Department of Justice?

**Yes**

5. If yes, please provide a brief description of the type of training attended or conducted and the topics covered.

**FOIA professionals took virtual FOIA training AINS (FOIAXpress), and VA OGC Information Law Group Training**

6. Please provide an estimate of the percentage of your FOIA professionals and staff with FOIA responsibilities who attended substantive FOIA training during this reporting period.

**75%**

7. OIP has [directed agencies](#) to "take steps to ensure that all of their FOIA professionals attend substantive FOIA training at least once throughout the year." If your response to the previous question is that less

than 80% of your FOIA professionals attended training, please explain your agency's plan to ensure that all FOIA professionals receive or attend substantive FOIA training during the next reporting year.

**Our Agency VACO FOIA Service has notified all VA FOIA Officers of the upcoming Spring and Summer DOJ FOIA Training schedule**

8. Did the personnel at your agency who have FOIA responsibilities attend training in federal records management during this reporting period?

**Yes**

**C. Outreach**

9. Did your FOIA professionals engage in any outreach or dialogue, outside of the standard request process, with the requester community or open government groups regarding your administration of the FOIA? Please describe any such outreach or dialogue, and, if applicable, any specific examples of how this dialogue has led to improvements in your agency's FOIA administration.

**No**

**D. Other Initiatives**

10. Describe any efforts your agency has undertaken to inform non-FOIA professionals of their obligations under the FOIA. In particular, please describe:

**None**

- how often and in what formats your agency provides FOIA training or briefings to non-FOIA staff; and
- if senior leaders at your agency received a briefing on your agency's FOIA resources, obligations and expectations during the FOIA process?

11. Optional -- If there are any other initiatives undertaken by your agency to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied, please describe them here.

**N/A**

**Section II: Steps Taken to Ensure that Your Agency Has an Effective System in Place for Responding to Requests**

DOJ's [FOIA Guidelines](#) emphasize that "[a]pplication of the proper disclosure standard is only one part of ensuring transparency. Open government requires not just a presumption of disclosure, but also an effective system for responding to FOIA requests." It is essential that agencies effectively manage their FOIA program.

Please answer the following questions to describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the management of your FOIA program is effective and efficient. You should also include any additional information that describes your agency's efforts in this area.

1. For Fiscal Year 2021, what was the average number of days your agency reported for adjudicating requests for expedited processing? Please see Section VIII.A of your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report.

2. If your agency's average number of days to adjudicate requests for expedited processing was above ten calendar days, according to Section VIII.A. of your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report, please describe the steps your agency will take to ensure that requests for expedited processing are adjudicated within ten calendar days or less.

**The Department is decentralized, and each component office must utilize the processing procedures to adjudicate requests for expedited processing. The VACO FOIA Office is encouraging all the Administrations and Central Office Components to ensure that the average number of days for adjudicating requests for expedited processing is less than 10 days and write office-specific SOPs with specific guidance on expedited processing.**

3. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 required all agencies to update their FOIA regulations within 180 days. In 2016, OIP issued Guidance for Agency FOIA Regulations and the accompanying Template for Agency FOIA Regulations to assist agencies in updating their regulations in accordance with the statute. Has your agency updated its FOIA regulations in accordance with the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016? If not, what is your agency's plan to update your regulations?

**Our Agency is currently in the process of rewriting/updating the VA FOIA Handbook the VA FOIA Directive, and our FOIA regulations in the Federal Registry.**

4. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) generally document your agency's internal processes for administering the FOIA beyond your FOIA regulations and FOIA Reference Guide. As noted in OIP's [guidance](#), having SOPs can improve the consistency and quality of an agency's FOIA process. SOPs can also serve as a significant resource for incoming FOIA professionals and a way to preserve much of the agency's institutional knowledge on administering the FOIA from how to handle requests from start-to-finish, to identifying and making proactive disclosures, to maintaining a FOIA website. Does your agency have up-to-date internal SOPs for your FOIA administration?

**Yes**

5. If not, please provide a timeline for when your agency plans to develop or update its SOPs.

6. Has your agency established alternative means of access to first-party requested records outside of the FOIA process?

**Yes**

7. If yes, please provide examples. If no, please explain if such opportunities exist at your agency and whether there are any challenges in establishing alternative means of access.

**Veterans can access their records online through eBenefits and MyHealthVet.**

8. Did your agency conduct a self-assessment of its FOIA administration during the reporting period? If so, please describe the self-assessment methods used, such as analyzing Annual Report or raw data, using active workflows and track management, reviewing and updating processing procedures, etc. In addition, please specifically highlight any data analysis methods or technologies used to assess your agency's FOIA program.

**No**

9. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires additional notification to requesters about the services provided by the agency's FOIA Public Liaison. Please provide an estimate of the number of times requesters sought assistance from your agency's FOIA Public Liaison during FY 2021 (please provide a total number or an estimate of the number).

**Our Agency had approximately 392 FOIA Public Liaison contacts/inquiries.**

10. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA-related staffing capabilities to identify resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands?

**Yes**

11. Optional -- Please describe:

- Best practices used to ensure that your FOIA system operates efficiently and effectively
- Any challenges your agency faces in this area.

### **Section III: Steps Taken to Increase Proactive Disclosures**

The Department of Justice has long focused on the need for agencies to work proactively to post information online without waiting for individual requests to be received.

Please answer the following questions to describe the steps your agency has taken to increase the amount of material that is available on your agency websites. In addition to the questions below, you should also describe any additional steps taken by your agency to make and improve proactive disclosures of information.

1. Please describe what steps your agency takes to identify, track, and post (a)(2) proactive disclosures.

**We consistently brief this to personnel during our quarterly FOIA calls, encouraging FOIA specialists to always consider records for proactive disclosure.**

2. Provide examples of any material that your agency has proactively disclosed during the past reporting year, including records that have been requested and released three or more times in accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(2)(D). Please include links to these materials as well.

**Our Agency has proactively disclosed a variety of information for public consumption at the following links:**

- **VA FOIA Library** <https://www.va.gov/FOIA/Library.asp>
- **Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Performance**
- <http://www.vba.va.gov/reports/aspiremap.asp>
- **Veterans Population Data**
- <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran Population.asp>
- **Global War on Terror (GWOT) / Gulf War Veterans**
- **Information System (GWVIS)** <http://www.va.gov/VETDATA/>
- **Gross Distribution of Expenditures (GDX)**
- <http://www.va.gov/VETDATA/Expenditures.asp>
- **Senior Leadership Emails/Travel, THIRD PARTY LAND USES**
- **Agent Orange**

3. Does your agency disseminate common types of material outside of FOIA, including in online databases where the public may access them? If yes, please provide examples and, if applicable, statutory authority.

**No**

4. Beyond posting new material, is your agency taking steps to make the posted information more useful to the public, especially to the community of individuals who regularly access your agency's website?

**Yes**

5. If yes, please provide examples of such improvements. In particular, please describe steps your agency is taking to post information in open, machine-readable, and machine-actionable formats, to the extent feasible. If not posting in open formats, please explain why and note any challenges.

**VA has made accessing information to the public readily and available via the FOIA reading room. VA has also made changes to the VA website to ensure the public can easily find information.**

6. Does your proactive disclosure process or system involve any collaboration with agency staff outside the FOIA office? If so, describe this interaction.

**No**

Optional -- Please describe:

- Best practices used to improve proactive disclosures

**Having all departments organize documents to ensure any information posted is concise and easy to access.**

- Any challenges your agency faces in this area

**No**

#### **Section IV: Steps Taken to Greater Utilize Technology**

A key component of FOIA administration is using technology to make information more accessible. In addition to using the internet to make proactive disclosures, agencies should also be exploring ways to utilize technology in responding to requests.

Please answer the following questions to describe how your agency is utilizing technology to improve its FOIA administration and the public's access to information. You should also include any additional information that describes your agency's efforts in this area.

1. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA-related technological capabilities to identify resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands?

**Yes**

2. Please briefly describe any new types of technology your agency began using during the reporting period to support your FOIA program.

**Our Agency utilizes VIEWS, an internal executive tasker tracking program, for conducting electronic searches and processing voluminous documents for complex requests. In addition, VA is also utilizing the Electronic Document Review tool in FOIAXpress, for processing voluminous documents for complex requests.**

3. OIP issued [guidance](#) in 2017 encouraging agencies to regularly review their FOIA websites to ensure that they contain essential resources, and are informative and user-friendly. Has your



agency reviewed its FOIA website(s) during the reporting period to ensure it addresses the elements noted in the guidance?

**Yes**

4. Did all four of your agency's quarterly reports for Fiscal Year 2021 appear on your agency's website and on FOIA.gov?

**No. Only Quarterly Reports 2, 3, & 4 were posted.**

5. If your agency did not successfully post all quarterly reports, with information appearing on FOIA.gov, please explain why and provide your agency's plan for ensuring that such reporting is successful in Fiscal Year 2022.

**This was an oversight on our part and we are on track to post all Quarterly Reports on our Agency website and FOIA.gov.**

6. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires all agencies to post the raw statistical data used to compile their Annual FOIA Reports. Please provide the link to this posting for your agency's Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report and, if available, for your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report.

FOIA Library - Freedom Of Information Act FOIA (va.gov)

7. Optional -- Please describe:

- Best practices used in greater utilizing technology
- Any challenges your agency faces in this area

## **Section V: Steps Taken to Improve Timeliness in Responding to Requests and Reducing Backlogs**

The Department of Justice has emphasized the importance of improving timeliness in responding to requests. This section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report addresses both time limits and backlog reduction. Backlog reduction is measured both in terms of numbers of backlogged requests or appeals and by looking at whether agencies closed their ten oldest requests, appeals, and consultations.

For the figures required in this Section, please use the numbers contained in the specified sections of your agency's FY 2020 and 2021 Annual FOIA Reports.

### **A. Simple Track**

Section VII.A of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "FOIA Requests – Response Time for All Processed Requests," includes figures that show your agency's average response times for processed requests. For agencies utilizing a multi-track system to process requests, there is a category for "simple" requests, which are those requests that are placed in the agency's fastest (non-expedited) track, based on the low volume and/or simplicity of the records requested.

1. Does your agency utilize a separate track for simple requests?

**Yes**

2. If your agency uses a separate track for simple requests, according to Annual FOIA Report section VII.A, was the agency overall average number of days to process simple requests twenty working days or fewer in Fiscal Year 2021?

No

3. Please provide the percentage of requests processed by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021 that were placed in your simple track. Please use the following calculation based on the data from your Annual FOIA Report: (processed simple requests from Section VII.C.1) divided by (requests processed from Section V.A.) x 100.

64%

4. If your agency does not track simple requests separately, was the average number of days to process all non-expedited requests twenty working days or fewer?

N/A

## B. Backlogs

When answering these questions, please refer to your Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report, Sections XII.D-E, which compare the numbers of requests and appeals received, processed, and backlogged between Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021.

### BACKLOGGED REQUESTS

5. If your agency had a backlog of requests at the close of Fiscal Year 2021, according to Annual FOIA Report Section XII.D.2, did that backlog decrease as compared with the backlog reported at the end of Fiscal Year 2020?

Yes

6. If not, according to Annual FOIA Report Section XII.D.1, did your agency process more requests during Fiscal Year 2021 than it did during Fiscal Year 2020?

N/A

7. If your agency's request backlog increased during Fiscal Year 2021, please explain why and describe the causes that contributed to your agency not being able to reduce its backlog. When doing so, please also indicate if any of the following were contributing factors:

- An increase in the number of incoming requests.

**Yes, the agency has seen an increase in requests this FY.**

- A loss of staff.

**Yes, we have had many staff changes, from contractors to federal personnel. We have utilized a lot of time training and onboarding personnel to assist in processing and reducing the backlog.**

- An increase in the complexity of the requests received. If possible, please provide examples or briefly describe the types of complex requests contributing to your backlog increase.



**Requests for emails of numerous individuals in one request**

- Impact of COVID-19 and workplace and safety precautions

**None**

- Any other reasons – please briefly describe or provide examples when possible.

**None**

8. If you had a request backlog please report the percentage of requests that make up the backlog out of the total number of requests received by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021. Please use the following calculation based on data from your Annual FOIA Report: (backlogged requests from Section XII.A) divided by (requests received from Section V.A) x 100. This number can be greater than 100%. If your agency has no request backlog, please answer with "N/A."

**7.8%****BACKLOGGED APPEALS**

- 9 If your agency had a backlog of appeals at the close of Fiscal Year 2021, according to Section XII.E.2 of the Annual FOIA Report, did that backlog decrease as compared with the backlog reported at the end of Fiscal Year 2020?

**No**

10. If not, according to section XII.E.1 of the Annual FOIA Report, did your agency process more appeals during Fiscal Year 2021 than it did during Fiscal Year 2020?

**No**

11. If your agency's appeal backlog increased during Fiscal Year 2021, please explain why and describe the causes that contributed to your agency not being able to reduce its backlog. When doing so, please also indicate if any of the following were contributing factors:

**There were a few factor that contributed to not reducing the backlog, such as an increase in the number we received for this FY, along with the complexity of the appeals, and loss of personnel to attrition, new jobs, or new duties.**

- An increase in the number of incoming appeals.
  - A loss of staff.
  - An increase in the complexity of the requests received. If possible, please provide examples or briefly describe the types of complex requests contributing to your backlog increase.
  - Impact of COVID-19 and workplace and safety precautions.
  - Any other reasons – please briefly describe or provide examples when possible.
12. If you had an appeal backlog please report the percentage of appeals that make up the backlog out of the total number of appeals received by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021. Please use the following calculation based on data from your Annual FOIA Report: (backlogged appeals from Section XII.A) divided by (appeals received from Section VI.A) x 100. This number can be greater than 100%. If your agency did not receive any appeals in Fiscal Year 2021 and/or has no appeal backlog, please answer with "N/A."

28.7%

### C. Backlog Reduction Plans

13. In the 2021 guidelines for Chief FOIA Officer Reports, any agency with a backlog of over 1000 requests in Fiscal Year 2020 was asked to provide a plan for achieving backlog reduction in the year ahead. Did your agency implement a backlog reduction plan last year? If so, describe your agency's efforts in implementing this plan and note if your agency was able to achieve backlog reduction in Fiscal Year 2021?

**Yes, the Agency is continuing its efforts in the area backlog reduction, and we are ensuring each Administration and Staff Office receives the assistance needed to process their backlog. VA continues to use contracting staff alongside federal personnel to search and process requests in a timely manner while also working on backlogged requests.**

14. If your agency had a backlog of more than 1,000 requests in Fiscal Year 2021, please explain your agency's plan to reduce this backlog during Fiscal Year 2022. In particular, please also detail how your agency developed and plans to execute your backlog reduction plans.

**The Agency utilizes contracting support for the backlog reduction initiative. Contracting support, along with federal employees are processing backlog requests and litigation cases.**

### D. Status of Oldest Requests, Appeals, and Consultations

Section VII.E, entitled "Pending Requests – Ten Oldest Pending Requests," Section VI.C.(5), entitled "Ten Oldest Pending Administrative Appeals," and Section XII.C., entitled "Consultations on FOIA Requests – Ten Oldest Consultations Received from Other Agencies and Pending at Your Agency," show the ten oldest pending requests, appeals, and consultations. You should refer to these numbers from your Annual FOIA Reports for both Fiscal Year 2020 and Fiscal Year 2021 when completing this section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report.

#### OLDEST REQUESTS

15. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest pending perfected requests that were reported in Section VII.E. of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

**Yes**

16. If no, please provide the number of these requests your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VII.E of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest requests to close, please indicate that.

**N/A**

17. Beyond work on the ten oldest requests, please describe any steps your agency took to reduce the overall age of your pending requests.

**The agency has used best practices to ensure all the Ten oldest request are processed and closed. Such as, administrative closures, conducting searches within interagency drives and the FOIAXpress processing software to ensure all requests are complying under the FOIA. We continue to update all SOP's, Directives and administrative memos to ensure enterprise-wide consistency on responses, and precise redactions to assist in reducing appeals.**

**TEN OLDEST APPEALS**

18. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest appeals that were reported pending in Section VI.C.5 of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

**Yes**

19. If no, please provide the number of these appeals your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VI.C.(5) of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest appeals to close, please indicate that.

**N/A**

20. Beyond work on the ten oldest appeals, please describe any steps your agency took to reduce the overall age of your pending appeals.

**The agency has used best practices to ensure all the Ten oldest request are processed and closed. Such as, administrative closures, conducting searches within interagency drives and the FOIAXpress processing software to ensure all requests are complying under the FOIA. We continue to update all SOP's, Directives and administrative memos to ensure enterprise-wide consistency on responses, and precise redactions to assist in reducing appeals.**

**TEN OLDEST CONSULTATIONS**

21. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest consultations that were reported pending in Section XII.C. of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

**Yes**

22. If no, please provide the number of these consultations your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section XII.C. of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest consultations to close, please indicate that.

**N/A**

**E. Additional Information on Ten Oldest Requests, Appeals, and Consultations & Plans**

23. Briefly explain any obstacles your agency faced in closing its ten oldest requests, appeals, and consultations from Fiscal Year 2020.

**None**

24. If your agency was unable to close any of its ten oldest requests because you were waiting to hear back from other agencies on consultations you sent, please provide the date the request was initially received by your agency, the date when your agency sent the consultation, and the date when you last contacted the agency where the consultation was pending.

**N/A**

25. If your agency did not close its ten oldest pending requests, appeals, or consultations, please provide a plan describing how your agency intends to close those "ten oldest" requests, appeals, and consultations during Fiscal Year 2022.

**N/A**

## F. Success Stories

Out of all the activities undertaken by your agency since March 2021 to increase transparency and improve FOIA administration, please briefly describe here at least one success story that you would like to highlight as emblematic of your agency's efforts. The success story can come from any one of the five key areas, but should not be something that you have reported in a prior year. As noted above, these agency [success stories](#) will be highlighted during Sunshine Week by OIP. To facilitate this process, all agencies should use bullets to describe their success story and limit their text to a half page. The success story is designed to be a quick summary of key achievements. A complete description of all your efforts will be contained in the body of your Chief FOIA Officer Report.

**This Fiscal Year our Agency saw an increase in the number of requests we received, and the level of complexity of these requests have also increased, requiring extensive searches with the probability of a very high volume of responsive records. We have also taken a great amount of time to train and revise the FOIA program throughout VACO. To mitigate this increase and the many labor-intensive man-hours to keep up with the processing workload and continue working to decrease the backlog, we are continuing to utilize Electronic Document Review (EDR) for FOIAXpress. Having the EDR technology has proven very effective in speeding up the discovery to search, sort and identify responsive records in large volumes of emails, attachments and other documents. Now our FOIA personnel can quickly filter, deduplicate, rank and sort documents for redaction and processing all within the FOIAXpress system.**